

Chapter 09. The Abhidharma Treatises of the Sarvāstivāda

The Sarvāstivāda school had the widest geographical distribution in the Indian subcontinent among all the early schools. After migrating from Pataliputra in 2nd CE, they made their home in Mathura. The school spread to Kashmir which ultimately became its orthodox base. A major sub sect of the school known as foreign teachers was prominent in Gandhara and Bactria.

The orthodox masters of Kashmir considered themselves the Vaibhāṣika, those who followed the Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra

In addition to its being widespread in India, the Sarvāstivāda was also the only schools to achieve popularity throughout Asia. Chinese pilgrim, I Tsing (671-695 century C.E.) reported finding Sarvāstivāda schools flourishing in Central Asia, South East Asia, island of Sumatra and Java, and in the North West province of China.

The texts of the Pali Abhidharma canon are ascribed to the Buddha himself while the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma books are ascribed to human authors who are compilers of Buddha's words. Nevertheless, like the Theravāda, it too maintains that the Buddha is the real author; the compilers simply gathered up and rearranged his scattered teachings. According to the Theravāda tradition, Sāriputra transmitted the Abhidharma to his disciples. All the seven canonical Abhidharma texts are said to be by the Buddha, the first Abhidharmika. The Buddha first taught it to the gods in the thirty-three (tāvatiṃsa) Heaven and it was transmitted to Sāriputra. In all probability, the Abhidharma has its origin in the sutras.

It is possible that most of the so-called Hīnayāna schools in India possessed their own sets of tripiṭaka. Unfortunately, most of these tripiṭaka are no ore extant. As far as the canonical Abhidharma texts are concerned, we are now in possession of only two complete sets: the seven books of Theravāda preserved in Pāli, and the seven Sarvāstivāda texts in Chinese translation. Of the latter, however the Prajñapti- Śāstra is only a partial translation; a fuller version is preserved in the Tibetan. It is in the Abhidharma treatises – comprising commentaries, sub commentaries and compendia besides the canonical texts- that these schools gradually defined and articulated their distinctive doctrinal positions.

The Abhidharma canon of Sarvāstivāda school is based on the central text Jñānaprasthāna and the six subsidiary treatises called the 'pādas' sastras. In addition to these canonical texts, there are several handbooks of Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma in Pali. The Jñānaprasthāna is also known as the Aṣṭagrantha or the eight chapters attributed to Katyayaniputra. It is considered to be the youngest of all the canonical works of the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma piṭaka.

Abhidharma

The Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma consists of seven canonical treatises. They are:

- Saṃgītiparyāya- Śāstra (SgPŚ) ('Discourses on Gathering Together')

- Dharmaskandha-Śāstra (DŚŚ) ('Aggregation of Dharmas')
- Prajñapti- Śāstra (PjŚ) ('Treatise on Designations')
- Dhātukāya- Śāstra (DKŚ) ('Body of Elements')
- Vijñānakāya- Śāstra (VKŚ) ('Body of Consciousness')
- Prakaraṇapāda- Śāstra (PrŚ) ('Exposition')
- Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra (JPŚ) ('Foundation of Knowledge')

Following these, are the texts that became the authority of the Vaibhāṣika, the Kasmiri Sarvāstivāda orthodoxy:

- Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra ("Great Commentary", on the Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra)

Little research on these texts has been published in English.

Yaśomitra mentions the Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra as the body, in relation to the other six as its feet, enumerating in the following order: "The Śāstra is the Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra; it is like a body having six feet —

Samgītiparyāya- Śāstra, Dharmaskandha-Śāstra, Prajñapti- Śāstra, Dhātukāya- Śāstra, Vijñānakāya- Śāstra, and Prakaraṇapāda- Śāstra

In a similar manner, Pu Guang explains:

The earlier six treatises have less doctrinal topics; it is the Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra that contains the most extensive doctrinal perspectives. Accordingly, the abhidharma masters of later time spoke of the six as the feet and of the Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra as the body.

This canonical set was completed around 2nd CE.

Dharmaskandha-Śāstra

Dharmaskandha-Śāstra was translated by Tsuan Chuang, and author is Venerable Moggallāna but the Sanskrit and Tibetan tradition ascribe it to Venerable Śāriputra. The Sanskrit fragments exist, totalling 22 numbered folios. The Dharmaskandha-Śāstra begins with a mātṛkā — given as a summary (uddāna) — of the topics to be discussed. These topics are then taken up and commented upon one by one, sequentially. In each exposition, a sūtra passage precedes the item-wise commentary.

With regards to doctrinal topics, the Dharmaskandha-Śāstra gave a list of the bases, aggregates and elements. The individual constituent classes the 37 limbs of enlightenment which cover major portion of the texts.

These chapters constitute one of the first attempts in the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma to systematize the marga scheme. This book draws the distinction between the path of insight and the path of cultivation. The latter portion of the text treats various

technical classifications such as the bases and elements. There is a synthesis of these two major divisions of the book in the 16th chapter, which emphasizes the defilements and their removal.

Samgītiparyāya- Śāstra

The Chinese translation by Xuan Zang gives Venerable Śāriputra as its author, but the Sanskrit and Tibetan tradition ascribe it to Mahākauṣṭhila. Only some fragments in Sanskrit exist. The text is a commentary on the Samgīti- Śāstra which is essentially a mātṛkā purporting to collect scattered teachings of the Buddha, presented in an enumerative format. The Samgītiparyāya- Śāstra follows this format. As commentarial explanations presumably must have accompanied such concise, enumerated doctrinal topics from the Buddha's time, the Samgītiparyāya- Śāstra as a direct commentary on the Samgīti- Śāstra to whose format it is confined — can be conceived as representing the result of the earliest Abhidharma development contemporaneous with the sūtra-piṭaka.

The matrix that opens the book includes 122 separate classifications of a total of 205 factors. It is arranged in a sequential series of monads, dyad, triads up to decades in a way that is similar to the format of the Ekottara-agama. One might also consider the use of dyads and triads and the tetra lemma analysis as further suggesting a relatively developed Abhidharma methodology. However, such features may also have been accrued as a result of revision of the text over time.

In its theory of the seven types of the noble persons, the Samgītiparyāya- Śāstra is slightly more developed than the Dharmaskandha-Śāstra. The Dharmaskandha-Śāstra refers to only two types of noble persons – faith followers, and the followers of dharma. Samgītiparyāya- Śāstra lists seven types of noble persons.

- i. Faith followers.
- ii. Dharma followers.
- iii. Resolved in faith.
- iv. View – attainers
- v. Bodily witness.
- vi. Liberated by wisdom.
- vii. Liberated both ways.

Prajñapti- Śāstra

This is the only one that is not extant in full in Chinese translation. It is the text most quoted in the Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra – about 135 times. The content of these quotations pertains mostly to cosmological doctrines, supernatural powers and particularly karma. This is in keeping with the general characteristics of the Dīrghāgama which, according to the Sarvāstivādin tradition, is meant for the proselytizers and aims at meeting the needs of the popular mentality. It appears that besides the Sarvāstivāda other schools/lineages such as the Vibhajyavāda and Vātsīputrīya too held the Prajñapti- Śāstra in high esteem.

In contrast to the above three treatises, the remaining four texts are clearly more developed in terms of organization and doctrinal concepts. Moreover, some

divergence notwithstanding, they all contain sectarian doctrines which can be regarded as specifically Sarvāstivāda. In addition, as regards authorship, all traditions agree in ascribing them to the Abhidharma masters subsequent to the Buddha's time. The following enumeration reflects only a probable relative chronological of these four treatises.

Vijñānakāya- Śāstra

The Chinese translation gives its author as Devaśarman which agrees with the Sanskrit tradition. According to Pu Guang, Devaśarman lived about 100 years from the Buddha's demise, which seems credible. Doctrinally, this is a highly esteemed Sarvāstivāda text, quoted 39 times by the Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra. It is in this text that, for the first time, the fundamental thesis of sarvāstivāda was explicitly upheld against the Vibhajyavādins. The whole text consists of six skandhaka-s, the discussions being centered around the six consciousnesses:

The text is divided into six sections, based on an analysis of the six types of sensory consciousness. Its main contributions to Abhidharma philosophy is its account of the Sarvāstivāda theory that dharmas exist in all three periods of time. It seems to have been a genuine belief on the part of the Sarvāstivāda that "sarvām asti" was what the Buddha himself taught.

Vijñānakāya- Śāstra says there was a distinct cause for the arising of consciousness that cognized past or future objects. If there were no such objects existing in reality, such cognition could not have taken place. Since they do occur, therefore past and future objects must also be real.

Another implied issue of this book whether a person (pudgala) exists. It gives the Pudgalavāda definition of pudgala as that which performs action, receives pleasure and pain, remembers, and transmigrate in Samsara.

Vijñānakāya- Śāstra also demonstrates its concern with the theory of causation. It mentions fourteen types of causes. It includes a discussion on the arising of the sense consciousness that focuses on the four types of conditions that brings about origination. This section is important because it represents the earliest attempt of the Sarvāstivādins to determine the functioning (kāritra) of a factor.

Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra

The fundamental importance of this treatise is clear from the fact that the Sarvāstivāda tradition came to uphold this as the 'body' of their canonical Abhidharma, in contrast to the six 'feet', although this does not necessarily in a straight forward manner imply that the Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra was a later compilation deriving its sources from the 'feet' texts. The definitive, encyclopaedic Abhidharma-Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra purports to be its commentary. This treatise is unanimously ascribed by all traditions to Kātyāyanīputra. The Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra decisively established the fundamental doctrines of the Sarvāstivāda, the date of its compilation cannot be too late. Xuan Zang's tradition placing Kātyāyanīputra in the 3rd century C.E. after the Buddha seems reasonable, and this would according to the Sarvāstivāda tradition placed him around 150 B.C.E.

The fundamental outlook of the Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra is soteriological. The entire book is an attempt to systematize the various stages of the path of spiritual cultivation based on the Four Noble Truths.

Chapter One deals with the higher worldly factors concerned with the truth of the Path.

Chapter Two is on the fetters that treats the truth of origination.

Chapter Three to Seven is about knowledge and concentration that deal with the truth of cessation. These chapters deal with actions, the four great elements and the faculties concerned with the truth of frustration.

While the first seven chapters deals with the correct outlook on Four Noble Truths, the final chapter deals with views devoted to rebutting the mistaken views of non-Buddhists.

The main body concern with the outline of the process of spiritual development. Concentration, the motive force behind progress on the path, is placed in seventh chapter, while the realities of the world and the reasons that practice that needs to be undertaken one placed in mid section. Knowledge the fundamental cause of liberation appears at the beginning of the book.

Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra opens with the notion of highest worldly factors. A higher worldly factor is a point of transition between a world-ling and the noble person and brings about the entrance into the path of insight (darśana mārga). Focusing on highest worldly factors Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra is able to integrate the major segments of the path, namely the mundane path of practice, path of insight, supra mundane path of practice and path of realization. With these stages of the path, Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra explain the transmutation of the world-ling into a saint as the highest religious aspiration of the Sarvāstivāda school.

Prakaraṇapāda- Śāstra

The text contains eight chapters. All traditions unanimously ascribe this text to Vasumitra.

The Prakaraṇapāda- Śāstra consists of eight chapters:

1. 'On the five groups' (Pañcavastuka)
2. 'On the knowledges' (Jñāna-nirdeśa)
3. 'On the entrances' (Āyatana-nirdeśa)
4. 'On the seven groups' (Saptavastuka)
5. 'On the proclivities' (Anuśaya-nirdeśa)
6. 'On subsumption, etc.' (Saṃgrahādi-nirdeśa)
7. 'Thousand-questions' (Sahasra-praśnaka)
8. 'On ascertainment' (Viniścaya-nirdeśa)

Its first chapter on the five classes of dharma-s seem to have enjoyed considerable popularity in China. It was translated as an independent text by An Shi-gao in one fascicle around 148 century C.E., and later in the Tang Dynasty by Fa-cheng. There is also a commentary on this first chapter, entitled Pañca-vastuka-vibhāṣā ascribed to Dharmatrāta, translated by Xuan Zang.

Eric Franwallner remarked that the Prakaraṇapāda- Śāstra is a compilation of virtually independent and self contained section. The Mahā- Prajñāpāramitā sastra enumerates Prakaraṇapāda- Śāstra as the first of the six parts Abhidharma, also states that out of its eight chapters, four chapters are authored by Vasumitra and the other four are by Kasmiran Arhats.

Dhātukāya- Śāstra

The only extant Chinese translation in three fascicles by Xuan Zang. The text is ascribes this to Vasumitra. The Sanskrit and Tibetan tradition, however, give its author as Pūrṇa.

Dhātukāya- Śāstra means group of elements. It consists of two parts. The first part is the fundamental section which enumerates mental elements and the second parts is about the analysis which is called vibhaṅga which analyses the mental elements. This comparatively short text bears similarities with the Pāli Sthaviravada text, the Dhatu-katha, in style and format, though it uses a different matrkā. As it is not mentioned in the Mahāvibhāṣā, this suggests it is either a later text, or originally a fragment removed from an earlier text.

Development of the Sarvāstivāda manuals *Abhidharma-mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra* (MVŚ)

The Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra is considered prominent. Its authorship is traditionally attributed to five hundred arhats, some 600 years after the parinirvāṇa of the Buddha. Its compilation, however, is attributed to a certain Katyāyāniputra. Subsequent to the definitive establishment of the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma doctrines by the Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra, there followed active and creative study, discussion, elaboration and systematization of these doctrines, the result of which was the compilation by the Kasmiran Sarvāstivādins of the Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra. Xuan Zang tells us that the Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra was compiled at the so-called Council' sponsored by King Kaniska of Gāndhāra.

Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra is now extant in three Chinese translations only. The earliest translation, now surviving in 14 fascicles, was first made in 383 C.E. by Saṃghabhūti. Saṃghadeva revised it, producing the extant version in around 389 C.E. The second translation, originally comprising 100 fascicles but now surviving in 60 fascicles, was made by Buddhavarman from 425 C.E. to 427 C.E. The third and most complete one, comprising 200 fascicles, was made by Xuan Zang from 656 C.E. to 659 C.E. The fact that the contents in the corresponding sections of these three versions often disagree to varying degrees suggests that their Sanskrit originals were probably different, and that there must have been a process of revision and emendation subsequent to the initial compilation, possibly spanning over a century. The orthodox Kasmiran Sarvāstivādins who upheld the supreme

authority of the Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra came to be known as the ‘Vaibhāṣikas’, an adjective derived from vibhāṣa.

Purporting to be the Great Commentary on the Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra, it structurally follows the same sequence of the eight major chapters of the latter, with an additional introductory chapter. In this gigantic work - encyclopedic in scope - are found not only the Jñānaprasthāna- Śāstra viewpoints upheld by its compilers as orthodox, but also the heterodox views of the other Sarvāstivāda ācārya-s, as well as those held by other early Buddhist schools and independent masters. Accordingly, it is a work of great importance, indispensable for the understanding of not only the orthodox Sarvāstivāda doctrines, but also of the historical development of all the contemporary schools, containing as it does a wealth of material largely unavailable elsewhere. The doctrinal positions and interpretations by the so-called “four great ācārya-s of the Sarvāstivāda” - Vasumitra, Dharmatrāta, Buddhadeva and Ghoṣaka are frequently given side by side. Among them, those of Vasumitra are generally upheld as being the best and most acceptable.

As such an immense text, it contains a huge array of material. This includes the discussion of basically every doctrinal issue of the day, as presented by not only non-Sarvāstivāda views, such as the Vaibhajyavāda, Pudgalavāda, Mahāsāṃghika, and others; but also non-Buddhist systems, such as the Saṃkhya, the Vaiśeṣika, and others; and finally of the Sarvāstivāda itself, as represented by its various learned and venerable leaders.

The Sarvāstivāda is one of the most important Buddhist schools during the period of Abhidharma development. An understanding of its doctrinal development is indispensable for gaining a proper perspective of the development in Buddhist thoughts in India as a whole. Its doctrines of ‘sarvām asti’- the tri-temporal existence of dharma-s had a tremendous impact on the Abhidharma schools and the Mahāyāna schools whether directly or indirectly, positively or negatively. As Skandhila puts it, “the terms and meaning in the Abhidharma, are bewildering as a dense forest (gahana),” and beginners are apt to feel bewildered and lost.